

Robert B. Irwin

Economic parity for the blind
through federal legislation

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ECONOMIC PARITY FOR THE BLIND THROUGH FEDERAL LEGISLATION

By

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Recent publication of the *Report of the National Resources Planning Board* and the introduction of the Wagner bill, S. 1161, have precipitated a discussion of all kinds of social legislation. Blind people and their friends are beginning to wonder just what benefits will come out of all this for the sightless people of the country. The time has arrived when the blind and their friends should come to an agreement as to the legislation which should be passed in their behalf so that a united front can be presented to Congress.

Among the subjects which are receiving serious consideration are:

1. *An amendment to the Federal income tax law permitting a blind taxpayer to make a personal deduction representing the cost of special services which he must buy because of his lack of sight.*
2. *An amendment to Title X of the Social Security Act which will permit Federal aid to be extended to a blind person in such a way as to encourage him to endeavor to become self-supporting.*
3. *A Federal insurance against blindness under which all blind persons will benefit.*
4. *A plan for the Federal matching of state funds expended for the maintenance of essential services to blind people not covered in the Rehabilitation or Social Security Acts.*

1. Many blind people feel that the Federal income tax law should recognize that blind people are compelled to meet certain expenses which their seeing associates do not have to meet. A given income does not represent as much purchasing power for the

usual necessities of life to a man who is blind as it does to his seeing brother. For example, a seeing man in a strange city will usually walk if he has to go but a few blocks, whereas a blind man, if alone, must of necessity take a cab. A seeing person of low income may forego a telephone but the use of a telephone is almost imperative in a household where either the breadwinner or his wife, or both, are without sight. A blind person must pay for many services which a seeing person performs for himself, such as reading the newspaper, shining his shoes, keeping his clothes tidy, and the like. Any tax law which does not take into account the inescapable cost of being blind cannot be said to distribute the tax burden with reference to ability to pay.

The amount of this exemption should vary with the income of the individual. It has been suggested that an arbitrary deduction of 10 per cent would be the simplest way to meet the situation, with a minimum deduction of approximately \$480 a year and a maximum of approximately \$1,250.

2. There is dissatisfaction regarding the administration of Title X of the Social Security Act. Many times this Act so operates as to discourage a blind person of low earning power from endeavoring to become at least partially self-supporting, because for every dollar he earns a corresponding amount is deducted from his security aid. The Social Security Board has with some measure of success taken steps to correct this administratively. There is need, however, for an amendment to this Act which would give those administering aid to the blind a freer hand in dealing with this problem. In arriving at the budget of a blind person two elements are taken into consideration: 1. The amount required to cover the usual necessities of life; and 2. An allowance to meet the inevitable expenses growing out of blindness. If the law were properly amended, when a sightless person begins to earn more than enough to meet this minimum budget plus expenses growing out of blindness, deductions from his aid to cover the usual necessities of life could be made on a percentage basis so that for each dollar earned over a certain amount, less than a dollar (possibly fifty cents) could be deducted from his relief allowance.

3. The demand from blind people for some kind of a Federal pension grows out of the feeling that somehow society has not done its duty or blind people, most of whose blindness is preventable, would not be struggling under a continual economic

handicap which seeing people are not compelled to meet. The percentage of incidence of blindness throughout the country is so constant as to make it quite certain that for many years to come every community may look forward to having a blind person for each 500 of the general population. Or to put it in another way, it is safe to predict that 1 out of each 100 of the wage earners of the United States will either go blind himself or one of his dependents will lose his sight. It should not be difficult to plan an insurance operated by the Federal government and supported by all wage earners which would provide every blind person with a small monthly income for life*, which would go far in most cases toward offsetting the economic disadvantages growing out of blindness. This monthly income should be paid regardless of economic status since the minimum cost of being blind must be met by persons from all walks of life.

It has been estimated that an insurance against blindness which would yield \$40 a month for life to each person who becomes blind would cost an average of 2c per working day for each wage earner—1¢ of which might be met by the employer and 1¢ by the employee. Such an insurance would involve the establishment of a Federal insurance fund to which its prospective beneficiaries would make regular contributions from their earnings. Since many people are already blind they have had no opportunity to contribute to this fund. Others in the future will lose their sight as children or as non-wage-earning housewives. For these reasons it may be felt that a share of the cost of maintaining this insurance should be met by contributions from the general funds of the government. Gradually this government contribution would decline as an increasing proportion of the sightless population is recruited from participating insured wage earners.

4. A study of the services rendered to the blind by the state commissions for the blind shows a wide variation in their adequacy from state to state. In certain parts of the United States reasonably satisfactory provision has been made for home teaching, medical care, and other services, but in other parts, aside from the education of children, blind people have been almost entirely neglected. This is due largely to the variation in general income in the different states. Those who have been endeavoring over a period of years to bring about more uniform treatment of the blind throughout the country are convinced that until the Federal gov-

*\$40 a month would seem a reasonable amount

ernment extends some kind of Federal aid similar to that provided for vocational rehabilitation, this variation in services to the blind from state to state will continue.

The Barden-La Follette Act, which provides aid to the state commissions for the blind in the maintenance of a vocational rehabilitation program, will correct in a measure this situation. There are, however, services required by the blind which do not fall under the classification of vocational rehabilitation, which should be provided for in any general legislation filling in the gaps in our Federal Social Security laws. This should take the form of Federal matching of state funds expended for certain services now carried on by the most progressive state commissions for the blind and generally recognized as being essential.

The time has arrived when all these matters should be thoroughly discussed by workers for the blind and the blind people themselves, and concrete plans agreed upon. No program will be satisfactory to all concerned. It will therefore be necessary for us to approach the subject in a spirit of mutual tolerance with a determination to find some common ground upon which all can stand.

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